





MK2 presents

# BLACK VENUS

A film by ABDELLATIF KECHICHE

France - 2010 - 35 mm and DCP - Color - 1.85 - Dolby SRD - English, French, Afrikaans, Dutch - 2h39

**MK2**

55, rue Traversière  
75012 Paris  
Tel: +33 1 44 67 30 30  
intlsales@mk2.com



Paris 1817, at the Royal Academy of Medicine. «I have never seen a human head so similar to that of an ape». Standing by a molded cast of Saartjie Baartman's body, anatomist Georges Cuvier's verdict is categoric. A group of distinguished colleagues break out in cheers. Seven years earlier, Saartjie left her native South Africa with her master, Caezar, to expose her body to the audiences of London's freak shows. Free and enslaved all at the same time, «The Hottentot Venus» became an icon in the slums, destined to be sacrificed in the pursuit of a shimmering vision of prosperity.

## ABDELLATIF KECHICHE INTERVIEW

*Abdellatif Kechiche responds here to the major questions asked in the film. For the purposes of this exercise, the questions have been formulated as a series of definitive statements. In a similar way to how people of the time would have made judgements about his heroine, Saartjie Baartman.*

### PSYCHOLOGY IS NOT ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN THE COMPLEXITY OF A BEING

Abdellatif Kechiche: Psychology limits our understanding of the human being. The appearance of a person alone can reveal a lot more about the subtleties of human nature than all attempts at psychological explanations. When cinema is able to be as subtle as real life, it's a wonderful thing. The acting has a lot to do with it... You always have to keep in mind that cinematic techniques can have a negative affect on the acting and render it completely lifeless...

And then, sometimes, for no good reason, there is a part that remains a mystery. Saartjie is a very mysterious person... that is what drew me to her in the first place... At the end of the day, we don't really know much about what really motivates her, we just have a few key dates: the journey from South Africa to England, the performances, the court case in London, her christening and her time spent with the French scientists. Everything else is just snippets of information. It is the spaces left between that are interesting to film. By preserving the sense of mystery around her we, the audience, are constantly forced to look inside ourselves for the answers.

I have read everything that has been written about her, and I found that too often there is a tendency for too much analysis. Either she was just portrayed merely as a slave, which I found difficult to believe because she could have taken the opportunity offered by the court case in London to claim her freedom. But she chose not to. On top of this, in the most recent historical findings, we know that she was performing in the Cape... Or, the stories of her life were over-romanticised and fictionalised, taking away the mystery surrounding her, which I personally felt was disrespectful. Respect was one of the first things that Saartjie Baartman

gained from me. This respect did not come from what was written about her, but from her whole persona.

A picture sometimes says so much more than words. That is what I felt when I discovered the drawings of Saartjie by the Museum illustrators. And, even more so when I saw the original plaster cast mould of her that remains in France to this day. I was incredibly moved by her face. It speaks more about her than anything I have read. You can clearly see her suffering, her face is swollen from drink and illness, but beyond that she seems (both in the drawings and the plaster cast) to have an ethereal quality, an almost mystical distance... Her endless suffering has a lot to do with this... the disappointment too... That was what I was most moved by. When I think about her I think about detachment, complete self-denial and intelligence. She must have known a lot about the nature of man... When I saw her, I felt compelled to tell her story...

### TO BE AN ARTIST, AS SAARTJIE TRIED TO BE, IS TO GIVE YOURSELF COMPLETELY TO THE PUBLIC, HOLDING NOTHING BACK

Saartjie never gave her whole self to the public even though she was constantly violated. What people saw was not her true self, it was a caricature: it was what they wanted to see. Accepting someone else's opinion of you, when that opinion is degrading, is very painful and complicated, and in that way she really was a slave. Saartjie was an artist, this was often written about: she played a musical instrument, had a good singing voice and danced well. As a true artist, the saddest thing perhaps was that she was never able to express her true self because that was not what people expected from her. She was



there to illustrate a set of beliefs and to consolidate the reasoning of that period. She was a prisoner of other people's beliefs. When it comes down to it, perhaps this is the main theme of the film, the oppression of beliefs. I really identified with this aspect of her character. It was how I felt as an actor when I was starting out. I suffered because of what people expected from me, not as an actor, but as an Arab man. I felt like I was in a prison. The parts offered to Arabs at that time were very limited.

### **THE PRINCIPAL ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR IS TO CREATE A POWERFUL GROUP DYNAMIC AMONGST THE PEOPLE HE WILL BE WORKING WITH**

Getting a team to work together in the same direction on a specific project is beneficial to the working process. In cinema, I've always tried to install the same strict work ethic as I learnt when working in theatre. That basically means not starting rehearsals on the first day of filming but rehearsing a long time in advance. The actors then get to know each other, form a bond and, consequently I am able to get a better understanding of each individual's potential. This concept of forming a troupe has been an obsession of mine for years. Strangely enough, with this film I felt more relaxed about this, more confident about the interaction that would occur between Yahima, Olivier, Andre, Elina, Michel etc. It felt instinctive. Take for example Andre Jacobs, when I saw his photo, it was as clear as day, he would be Caesar. I had never seen him act before and I did not even ask him to audition.

### **THE CHOICE OF A NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTOR, SUCH AS YAHIMA TORRÈS, GUARANTEES AUTHENTICITY FOR THE ROLE**

Even with no experience as an actor you are still capable of overacting. I chose her because I hadn't found a black actress whose body shape was similar to Saartjie Baartman. I saw Yahima for the first time in 2005. She was walking down the road close to where I live. I was taken aback by her aura and her physical features which immediately made me think of Saartjie. When I contacted her again a few years later to audition, it was Yahima's light-hearted approach to life that reassured me that I had made the right choice. I knew that I would be able to push her emotionally without damaging her.

I then went about choosing a group of actors that could support her; the 'troupe' that is so important in my eyes. All her screen partners, all these experienced actors were not only amazing, but were naturally protective and kind to Yahima. The idea that you can take non-professional actors to achieve a spontaneous performance is a myth. It is much easier to work with professional actors, if they are talented, than with non-professional actors that you have to teach and explain everything to in detail. In the beginning they may have a natural gift, this is relatively common, but from then on it takes an awful lot of work to get them to a professional standard. An authentic performance only comes with hard work.

### **PERIOD DETAIL IN CINEMA KILLS BOTH THE BIG AND THE LITTLE STORY**

Adapting a period piece for the cinema runs the risk that you only focus on getting the visual details right and you get distracted. I am sure it must be very satisfying to recreate the past in the minutest detail, and to do it properly, as in a painting. But again you jeopardise the reasons why you are doing it by putting your energy into the wrong things. As far as I was concerned the risks were limited, because the funding was limited. The original cost estimate for the film was double what it actually ended up costing to make. The first thing I had to cut back on was the period set. Anyway, the very over-designed sets often used in cinema to illustrate the past have never really interested me. I have always been far more interested in filming faces with the least make-up possible rather than sets and costumes. In doing this I have freed myself from the usual financial and time constraints of cinema such as hours spent on make-up, lighting etc. Anyway, my main interest in Saartjie Baartman's life has always gone far beyond the historical aspect. I have always been fascinated by the complex power struggles in relationships built on domination and the problems encountered by people in the entertainment world. And the position people hold.

### **FOR WOMEN, ALL MEN ARE WOLVES**

That's a bit hard on the poor wolf... Human beings are as they are, capable of the best and the worst. It is true that men have often oppressed women throughout history...

Now imagine what it was like for a black woman who had physical differences! She alone is an incarnation of every motive for oppression. To be honest, I was not trying to put the blame on men... I was more concerned about filming what had been reported, in order to try to understand how such oppression is conceivable. I tried as hard as I could not to cast judgement on anyone but sometimes that was not easy. For example, when it comes to the scientists I simply transcribed onto film what they had written or done, and that was enough. Sometimes I found it so violent that I had to dilute the facts. When I found out that the scientific committee that studied the "live" Saartjie – which in view of the comments they recorded must have been very humiliating for her – took advantage of her death to find out what they had not been able to when she was alive, I found that absolutely horrific. You cannot, in the name of science, be so inhumane... I could not believe that smart gentlemen could butcher a woman's dead body in total impunity and then put it into jars, and parade it about, giving lectures, as if it was a trophy... Yes, of course you could say that they considered her an animal, but that's not entirely true. They were trying to prove that she was closer to an animal than a human, but everything in their notes leads us to believe that they were unsure... For starters, an animal would never have stood up to them and refused a full examination. Perhaps that is what I am most angry with them about: intellectual dishonesty. They were not blinded by their ideas, they blinded themselves deliberately with ambition. The race was on, in the scientific world, to see who would be the first to come up with the proof that would justify the exploitation of Africa that was going on at the time. They had to take any hint of humanity away from the African people to give themselves the right to oppress them.

### **AFRICAN CULTURE AND THE NOTION OF CIVILISATION ARE OPPOSED**

This is the kind of statement that illustrates the viciousness with which pseudo-intellectual movement is trying to make Africans lesser people. I refuse to get involved in any such debate. It's the same way Cuvier thought. He believed that even though the Egyptians had black skin that they belonged to the White race. I'll leave it to the

African intellectuals, who will do a far better job than me, to defend their place in the history of humanity. It is essential for each society to know their history. I am convinced that it is unhealthy to ignore the past. By giving life to Saartjie Baartman, I hope in my own way to have shed some light on a grey area of France's history, and get people talking.

### **SAARTJIE IS NOT THE SYMBOL OF THE OPPRESSION OF BLACK PEOPLE, AS CELEBRATED IN SOUTH AFRICA IN 2002**

Depending how history is told, either she is portrayed as a slave in the most basic sense of the term i.e. as woman in a cage, exploited and mistreated. Or she is portrayed as woman who acted completely of her own accord. Either way, she was mistreated. I don't think that is the point. The fact that she might have performed of her own free will does not lessen her power as a symbol of oppression of black people. In fact, it probably adds to it. Because the psychological violence inflicted on Saartjie is far more intolerable than any act of physical violence. But also because by detailing the complex nature of her oppression we are creating a link with all the forms of oppression that still exist today. In this way, caricatures of minority groups and petty racist remarks are another form of oppression that reinforce the domination of any man, woman or group of men by another. This is still happening today.

### **THE PROCESS OF MAKING A FILM IS A PERMANENT STRUGGLE, EVEN WITH ONESELF, TO PRESERVE ARTISTIC INTEGRITY**

Artistic integrity is an ideal. We struggle to obtain it. First you battle against others, because each person imagines the film in a certain way. Trying to get everyone working together on the same concept is very difficult. You need nerves of steel not to let go of your vision and see through the choices you have made. And sure you struggle with yourself, because of course we are all easily influenced by others, and familiar with all of the cinematic conventions. Questioning everything is not an easy thing to do. Conventions are there to reassure. Going against them puts you at risk and exposes your work to misinterpretation...

Filming “Black Venus” was not always easy for everyone, especially for the technical team... It was the general feeling I got, that is difficult to put my finger on. Filming someone’s suffering, especially in the scenes that took place in the libertine salons, repeatedly rehearsing each take in order for the truth of the characters to show through, left no one untouched. Between writing “he hits her” or “she lay on the floor in front of her audience” and seeing it, there is a big difference that can make things very uncomfortable... You can’t approach a film like this as you would a gentle romantic subject. When you question humanity, it undoubtedly has an affect on those involved in the filmmaking process.

The scene in the libertine salon was the most striking example. In the script the scene was far cruder and more explicit. Everyone was looking to me to see how I was going to direct the scene. I relied upon existing witness statements and interpreted them in my own way. For example when I “saved” the libertines who put a stop to the performance when confronted with Saartjie’s tears. I liked the idea that after having suffered violence at the hands of the scientists, Saartjie is then confronted with a group of people, libertines, who looked upon her as an object of beauty and desire and end up respecting her. I also wanted to question the power of the group, where the individual feels less exposed as his responsibility is shared with others...

Even though I filmed what is unbearable on a human level, I never lost sight of the rules of respect towards my team. I let myself be guided by all the preparation I had done as well as whatever came out spontaneously. It is the actor, his emotion, his violence and his rhythm that give you the feeling as a director that you need to go this way or that... As with my previous films, I wanted the set to be a space for creation and not just a pre-planned performance.

#### THE FILMMAKER’S OPINION DICTATES AND INFLUENCES THE OPINION OF THE SPECTATOR

I have never felt as much as pressure of opinion as I have when making this film. To construct Saartjie’s character as truthfully as possible, I led an investigation to piece together the facts about her life. And it’s these details that I used to build her story. Like the moment when a woman in the audience in London pokes Saartjie on the bottom with an umbrella. This is how the story was told by a witness at the time. People really did go and see the Hottentot Venus to touch her bottom even though they were afraid of being bitten.

The violence in the film comes primarily from the way people see Sarah. The film makes us as the audience consider how we view others. It makes us think about cinema too in general: what does the audience expect? What should we as filmmakers give them? How should we deliver it?

The question of what actually is the director’s responsibility follows on from this. My approach was to get inside each of the characters. Caezar may have been thinking about getting rich, but he still had certain artistic demands. Réaux is a showman ready to do anything to satisfy the expectations of his public. Even Cuvier, beyond his scientific ambitions, shows signs of aesthetic consideration. I wanted to give each character their own set of beliefs.

A person watching a story such as this has to be alert. First of all me, as I don’t have all the keys necessary to explain, or to understand Saartjie’s character despite the empathy I feel for her. I never saw her as a symbol or as a saint, but as someone who could teach me to talk about certain things. Look at the aura she still has today. Despite everything that was taken from her I believe that Saartjie still has more to give, something more to tell us. Perhaps after ten years spent “together”, I have become her instrument (laughs).





## YAHIMA TORRÈS SAARTJIE

When was the first time you heard of the “Hottentot Venus”?

Yahima Torrès: I didn't know much about Sarah until Abdel first told me about her. We met by chance in Belleville in 2005 when he was preparing “The Secret of The Grain” (aka “Couscous”) and then three years later when he was casting “Black Venus”. I was very touched and also honoured that Abdel chose me for the role. I started compiling as much information as I could find about her on the internet.

This woman suffered enormously. She often felt extremely vulnerable and lonely even when “protected” by Caezar or when she was surrounded by other women “friends” in the brothel. What I really appreciated about Abdel's portrayal of Sarah was the multiple facets to her character. She deeply yearned to be an artist at a time when people were incapable of looking beyond physical appearances. Sarah was an exotic creature, someone both physically and culturally different. This story needed to be told, for the good of mankind.

How did you manage to immerse yourself in this character that we still know so little about today?

Sarah's characterisation built up little by little. This role is packed with intense emotions, and sadness, but there is also her pure determination and ability to manage her differences. I had to learn the basics of Afrikaans, her very particular way of dancing, to play an instrument and to sing. I had to be good enough at these arts to be as multi-talented as she was. I can sympathise with how lonely she must have felt having left

her home country. Before coming to live in France I lived in Cuba – there I experienced a strange mix of discovery, learning and yet yearning for my homeland all at the same time. Every immigrant needs to stay connected to their roots whether through meeting other people, listening to certain music or keeping strong memories alive. I was lucky to have all of that; Saartjie never really had any connection with her roots.

Apart from this being your first ever film role, it is also a multi-faceted artistic challenge for an actress...

Yes, she is a very physical character. In preparation for the part I took singing lessons and African dance classes, even though I had a good head start living in Cuba! It is a very elemental style of dance, tribal, trance-like, as if the energy is coming out of the earth... Even whilst we were filming I continued my training in order to keep up with Saartjie's energy. I had a personal trainer and did a lot of breathing exercises to go the full distance and bring her character to life.

As a woman, can you understand another woman's choice to exhibit her body in the desire for recognition?

Saartjie's dream was to come to Europe to make it as an artist. In South Africa, she was working for Caezar, in exchange for a minimum wage; in theory slavery had been abolished but Saartjie's family had always worked for white colonialists. Plus she was Caezar's partner, most probably because he offered her protection in a strange land.

As regards her body, no one today dares imagine that a woman does not have the right to say “no”. When Sarah exhibits herself, it does not mean that she is authorising violation of her body. Otherwise it is just abuse, a form of domination that is sub-human.

In the film scene where Saartjie is playing the role of a sex slave in a Parisian salon, the libertines are aroused. They see her as an object of pleasure, but Sarah’s facial expression shows that she knows she is a woman, a human being, and she looks at them like they are the animals.

*Did you regard Sarah as an artist from the outset?*

Yes. She was capable of doing beautiful performances on stage and communicating her emotions to an audience. Even though the performances she subsequently gave were not the sort originally promised by Caezar, she retained her artistic integrity. For example, when she began to sing songs about her African heritage, in her wonderful voice, no one derided her then. On the contrary, the audience went silent as she won them all over. She could have been a fantastic spokesperson for African culture if people could have seen beyond her physical differences. Saartjie didn’t speak much but she observed and thought deeply.

*How do you feel about the two men, Caezar and then Réaux who dominated Saartjie?*

Caezar was responsible for the performances in London: he understood that by getting Sarah to play the role of “Hottentot Venus” he would make more money than by simply showing off Sarah’s unusual physical attributes. He manipulated her for his own ends and crossed the limits that prove he could not have had much respect for her.

On the other hand he did take care of her in his own way. They were also having a relationship. She had been drinking for a few years but when he left her alcohol became her only companion. I am not implying that Saartjie wanted to die, but she had no more will to live. Réaux was nothing like Caezar; the only thing they had in common was that he too promised her the moon. In my eyes, he was far worse and had no compassion for Sarah – he was a circus showman whose only interest was to make money. He went as far as prostituting Sarah and even pimped his own girlfriend Jeanne.

*Georges Cuvier, in the name of science, was the person who most violently undermined Sarah’s dignity...*

He and his scientific committee chose to ignore that Sarah was a human being and regarded her as an animal, an object of curiosity. Cuvier catalogued Sarah’s unusual physique, to serve his own ambition. She understood this perfectly and differentiated between her stage performances where she showed her intimate parts and her days spent with this group of scientists. She refused to allow the scientists to examine her genital organs because she knew they were violating her body and her sense of self. The only person who had true regard for her dignity and held her in respect was the artist Jean-Baptiste Berré. He drew sympathetic sketches of her, giving her back her humanity as if thanking her for who she was. It is a very moving scene in the film; a space where the film can breathe and the audience can take stock.

*Abdellatif Kechiche considers Saartjie with honesty and respect, he considers you in the same way as a woman and as an actress...*

Yes, and his opinion is as much that of an artist as of another human being. He has never allowed himself to judge Saartjie or any of the other characters. Which translates on the film set into total respect for the actors. That is why I never once felt uncomfortable when we were filming the nude scenes or the scenes of sexual subjugation in the libertine salons. On top of rehearsals and my performance, Abdellatif was very careful to make sure that I was neither hurt nor emotionally scarred by acting out such violent scenes. The other actors were also all very supportive. I felt completely secure.

*What do you think are the modern day echoes of a life such as Sarah’s?*

It was of the utmost importance that Sarah’s remains be returned to South Africa because everyone has the right to a respectful burial. In South Africa, there now exists an organisation named after Sarah that helps women who are victims of abuse. For obvious reasons, she has become a symbol.

Now she is finally considered as a person in her own right. The film conveys a simple yet universal message that we have everything to learn from others. And in order to achieve this we need to learn to respect what is different whether it be physical, cultural or linguistic differences. That is what being human is all about.







## ANDRE JACOBS HENDRICK CAEZAR

**What did you know about the life of Saartjie Baartman before filming “Black Venus”?**

Andre Jacobs: She is considered an icon for many South Africans. I knew that she had spent time in London and that the French returned her remains to South Africa a few years ago. But I only read her story when I was preparing for the film. The South Africans will hate me for saying this, but I think it’s a good thing that the French, and not the South Africans, have made this film.

Saartjie is a universal symbol beyond being a national one. Her story is one of horrific dehumanisation, which alas knows no frontiers. Abdel did an enormous amount of research into her life but he did not want to make a historical film. I think he made the right choice. It is the moral and philosophical aspects of the film as well as its contemporary relevance that interest me the most.

**What did you learn about Caezar during your research?**

In real life he was a rugged, illiterate farmer who lived in the Cape Province. His wife fell ill during her first pregnancy so Saartjie looked after the child. A Scottish doctor for whom Caezar worked suggested putting on a show in London with Saartjie to make money. They accepted and left for London on a journey that would turn into a nightmare. In the film, Caezar is portrayed as being driven above all by money and success. If he had been a musician, Saartjie would have been his violin. She was his instrument.

**How were you able to play the part without judging him?**

Abdel didn’t want any judgement cast on any of the characters. An approach that makes the film strong. It was far more difficult for me to be objective; I needed to talk through Caezar’s character at length with Abdel. During the first week when we were filming the scenes in Piccadilly I was still asking myself questions about Caezar

and how I was going to play him. Abdel simply calmed any doubts I had by saying: “You’re thinking about it too much. What you’re doing is good.” I finally let go, the trust in his eyes was sufficient.

**Abdellatif first showed you signs of his trust in rather a surprising way the first time you met him...**

It was extraordinary. At the beginning of 2009 my agent called me to tell me that a French production company was looking for South African actors with my age and background. Forty days or so later I went to Paris for the first time ever. When I saw Abdel he just looked at me and smiled. I knew then that I had the part...

In my view, every one of his films asks the question about what it means to be French, and the relationship to others, but “Black Venus” opens the way for a more universal approach. From the first scene I realised that Abdel shoots in a completely different way from the Hollywood directors, and the minute by minute approach that I was used to in South Africa. It was a real revelation to me.

**There is also the tight-knit working group, very similar to that in the theatre, that Abdellatif Kechiche creates around himself on each of his film sets...**

In the court scene, when Caezar is defending himself against charges of slavery, he presents Saartjie as an artist. She confirms this to the judges: a status that is more important to her than being a free woman. You really feel this consideration for the artist when you work with Abdel. He has a natural ability to draw together actors who have the potential to work as a group and the mix is fascinating. Olivier is a very precise actor who has amazing control of his energy, whereas I have more of a tendency to externalize my emotions. There was a true alchemy between us.

As for Yahima, she was playing her first ever role in the cinema, and what a part!

Filming was difficult for her, we all gave her a lot of support, but she has an amazing inner strength. She showed such determination which enabled her to get right to the core of Sarah's character, and play her role.

**How would you explain the unique mixture of love, affection and domination that ties Saartjie to Caezar?**

It's difficult because their relation is very complex. Caezar expects a lot from her from an "artistic" point of view. He pushes her to commit herself totally to her art. When he detects any form of resistance from Saartjie he can become very violent. At the same time he looks after her, a bit like a father with his child. In his own way, of course. When Caezar gets drunk, he sees her as a woman and takes advantage of her, sexually. At the time, this was very common behaviour in South Africa, especially in the Cape, where I live. It was almost an insult not to have this kind of rapport. Caezar was therefore able to abuse her. But above all he was obsessed with making money. Saartjie was his ticket to climb the social ladder.

**Do you consider Caezar to be a director?**

Not in the strictly artistic sense, no. Caezar is not even a man of the theatre, he does not have the flair. On stage, he treats Saartjie like a General would a soldier. He does not direct her, he gives her orders. His aim, above all, is to make himself look good. When Saartjie improvises and sings and plays music beautifully he is furious because he is so afraid that she will steal the show from him. Deep down, he does

not care at all about Saartjie's artistic performance and the emotions she conveys to the audience.

**Caezar believed that an artist should have no boundaries when in front of an audience. Do you share his views?**

This depends on the artist. It is for each person to decide if he needs limits and where to place them. Personally I believe you have to push yourself to your limit to be able to create. That is when the line between the character and yourself becomes very thin: at certain times Caezar and I were the same person, if just the fact that we were both strangers in London. I too was a stranger in Paris, I was on a film set where everyone else was speaking a different language to my own.

**Has this film made you question your own perception of mankind?**

Incredibly. As a South African, living in a culture deeply marked by the relationship between class and race, this film really resonates within me. I find it both powerful and universal, because it does not make racism its main theme. "Black Venus" speaks about inhumanity. Saartjie was humiliated whilst she was alive and continued to be humiliated after her death. She never stopped being violated, right up until the moment she was bought back to South Africa.

It is definitely not an easy film, but pushing people to look beyond appearances, to see "others" in their full complexity is key to the evolution of us as sentient human beings.





## OLIVIER GOURMET RÉAUX

*How did you go about building up the character of Réaux, when there is so little factual information about him?*

Olivier Gourmet: There is a lot of information about the black Venus but when I searched on the internet for the name Réaux almost nothing came up! Abdel obviously did slightly more investigative work than I did! (laughs) I mostly built up the character drawing on his love of instinct, naturalness and pleasure in every given moment. Réaux is an intelligent person who knows how to analyse each situation and take advantage of those around him exploiting their character flaws and depraved natures.

Abdel was insistent that Réaux should not be made into an evil or Machiavellian figure. Primarily because a certain level of respect and affection did exist in his relationship with Saartjie. He was immersed in a showman's world where being aware of another person's limits did not exist. The historical context at that time and the world of the fairground are his defence: a lot of people had never been educated about where the boundary lies between good and evil, between respect and debasement. Abdel discusses Réaux's character in a way that gives you, as an actor, a certain amount of artistic freedom. This loose approach suits me perfectly. I always begin work on a part by digging down to find the humane aspect of the person.

*In your view is Réaux just a man who has no boundaries aside from his own personal satisfaction?*

He never once shows any outward sign of regret, remorse or sudden realisation. There is something about him which is instinctively animal, which is so wrong of course, because what he does with Saartjie is terrifying. Réaux is also a showman with a huge ego and is looking for fame and recognition, probably more so than Caesar.

The purpose of Abdel's film is also to show that Saartjie was not coerced to come to

France by Caesar. She was aware that Réaux and Caesar were exploiting her. Despite this, she continued... It is a film in which the moral boundaries of each person are blurred, like it is hard to differentiate between tolerance and intolerance nowadays.

*In the world of the fairground, and in Réaux's own behaviour, there is a sexual undercurrent that is very unexpected!*

At the time, there was a lot of licentious behaviour within that fairground environment. The moment there is alcohol and drinking people lose their inhibitions. This comes naturally to fairground people: people rub up together, enjoy physical contact, it's natural.

Réaux lives life to the full. He is driven by a quest for new sensations, excitement, and money. That is probably why he has no idea that he destroys everyone he comes into contact with. Réaux is a typical fairground person, a physical and therefore sensual man. I could relate to this because I am the sort of actor who finds it easier to express himself physically rather than with words. I also think that Abdel wanted to choose actors with a predisposition to take on the physicality of the role.

*Does playing a part such as Réaux, such a murky character, inspire pleasure or is it uncomfortable to play?*

That depends. I didn't find enough material to be able to form a personal opinion of him, or even to consider judging him. I see Réaux as a businessman who needs to keep the show on the road. For example, I never asked myself whether or not he had a problem with black people or whether he was sexist and wanted to dominate women. It is up to the filmgoer to make up his or her own mind. The aim of the film is to encourage the viewer to question himself about Saartjie's situation and what it was that enabled certain people to be able to manipulate her. The aim is not to shock nor is it voyeurism.

Voyeurism is the precise pitfall that Abdellatif Kechiche avoids in the two scenes where Réaux exhibits Saartjie in the Parisian salons as an object of desire and of sex...

We rehearsed and filmed the scene in the first bourgeois salon over a period of three nights with two cameras shooting 50-minute non-stop takes. The actors were left to be free agents, improvising from directions in the script. It was like throwing yourself off a cliff and flying through the air hoping to find something or someone to grab hold of during the fall. And that is what happened, night after night, trying things out, finding something and perfecting it.

In some ways we had to get to the point of exhaustion for the truth to show through. With Abdel, the more things you experience, the more enriched you become, these moments bind together all the actors involved.

When Réaux goads the libertines in the Massai salon calling to them “Come closer and go beyond your inhibitions!”, as spectators, we feel we are being addressed, and it is as if we, as human beings, are being tested.

In Réaux’s mind, it might be an invitation for tolerance, but I wasn’t thinking about that... I never thought I was capable of doing what I did in that scene: parading about with an ivory penis, grabbing the breasts of the woman who sat astride Yahima. We had to go at it all together, and just give, give give... It was never ever too uncomfortable, because it was Abdel directing, and because no one was forced to hurt or damage themselves.

This scene is a perfect résumé of the whole film: it questions our sense of human dignity. I also experienced this from an actor’s standpoint. Even when I was improvising I maintained a certain emotional distance so as not to be swallowed up by playing the part or to avoid losing the meaning of the scene. The only things I had to go on were my own physical and intellectual boundaries.

It’s also a question of decency, of respecting your acting partner, in this case, Yahima who I would never have risked hurting. Communication between the two of us was

always good. We both stepped up to the mark together... By holding back directionally, Abdel is able to push you deep within your being. He gives you confidence and respect.

Do you believe that one of the keys to acting is to question your limits with each new film you work on?

I think that each artist has a sense of their own modesty and a sense of intimacy. There are limits that do not need to be passed as it does nothing to benefit their talent. Nevertheless, there is some truth in the idea that you can distance yourself so much emotionally that you can show everything; Réaux is convinced of this.

How do you think that Saartjie Baartman’s life has resonance today?

Obviously, the fears of the world have evolved but both intolerance and humiliation still prevail. There may no longer be “freak” shows, but we display other freaks of nature, other monsters have emerged, and all of this is available to see on the internet. At the time the film was set, in the early 19th century, people had scientific discovery and novelty value as an “excuse”. People were genuinely curious about the unknown. They weren’t particularly afraid of it. Today, the unknown no longer really exists. Yet I find society more and more perverse and tempted by voyeurism...

Is it important that a film such as “Black Venus” leaves its interpretation open-ended for the spectator?

That is the true essence of some of the greatest films: they are the ones that invite the spectator to create his own story and take a position. There is no need to lead the spectator by the hand and spell out the morality of the film letter by letter. At the heart of this film is a very strong story which is told in an intelligent enough way to leave the viewer free to make his own judgement.



## FRANÇOIS MARTHOURET GEORGES CUVIER

What did you know about Saartjie's life and the role Georges Cuvier played in it?

François Marthouret: I had just a vague memory of this famous plaster cast mould that I had seen exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme. I knew none of the details of her life, nor the struggle that continued up until 2002, when her remains were taken back to South Africa... As for Cuvier, all I knew was the street named after him (laughs)

Have you reached your own interpretation of the nature of the "relationship" that Cuvier had with Saartjie?

It would appear that Cuvier, beyond his scientific research, fell in love with his subject. This probably made him feel ill at ease and brought about a subjective and also very human side to his scientific research. His attachment to this woman probably undermined some of his opinions as a savant. The determination with which he tried to prove his improbable theories seems strange for an intelligent man. The inhumanity of his obsession still remains a mystery to me.

What does the film's portrayal of Saartjie's character inspire in you?

She is portrayed in the film as very intelligent but also appears naïve. She is curious about life and aware of the power that people exert to control her. This prejudice way of seeing others still exists today in many forms. Even though we have all the tools to be able to judge what is inhumane, we continue saying "What a damned society we are. Why are we incapable of moving forward!".

What vision of the cinema and artistic commitment do you share with Abdellatif Kechiche?

Even though I work a lot in the theatre I am like a kid when it comes to cinema (laughs). When Abdel, who I have known for a long time, offered me this part I was as happy as a young novice. Especially as I love his films. His openness, his ability to capture each living detail that make up a human being and his real sensitivity, can never be over-emphasized.

Abdel also gives his actors a lot of his own time, and that time is a real opportunity. An opportunity to doubt, to try out and to contradict. That is a real luxury in filmmaking, especially for me as I only ever get it right after about the 17th take (laughs). So I am left with no excuse!

Allowing the actors to build their own characters, even during filming, is that the best way to reach the "truth" that you were talking about?

I would say that Abdel has a similar approach to that of a craftsman which suits me perfectly. I was fascinated by his ability to take on board life's little surprises. We can see that he has done an enormous amount of research on his subject and yet at the same time has left room for empiricism.

Abdel let each actor re-interpret what he or she had imagined the character to be, without being some mad conductor, driving us in any direction that took his fancy. Because this is about life and life is not formulaic. An actor can convey life through his expressions, which can take so many different forms. So why hold oneself back?





Do you think, following Abdellatif Kechiche's example, that Cuvier and his team of scientists were guilty of "intellectual dishonesty"?

When you first start working on a character, you try to defend them. Whatever his ideals were, his desires whether secret or not, I find it hard to believe that Cuvier was guilty of "intellectual dishonesty". On a political level, for example, he was incredibly flexible and adapted easily to changes in regimes. You could be fooled into thinking that he was motivated by the love of science, but the truth was he was highly decorated each time...

Intellectual honesty is a difficult concept. There are so many examples in politics today, of people who are probably honest at their core but do not realise that they are being corrupted by a system that allows them to stop looking at others and only look at those who "swim" in the same privileged circles as they do. And because they think that life is about "swimming", they believe that they are not being dishonest.

Aside from the hypothesis of love, what other reasons can explain Cuvier's dogged determination to prove his abhorrent theories?

His ambition and opportunism was such that he would never have gone against the ideas of those in power. Had his theories been put into question, the whole system on which certain interests of society were based would have collapsed. On the other hand, if he confirmed that the White Man was superior, it legitimised colonization. If that was his reasoning, and he was aware of it, we can then talk about crimes against humanity.

How does one tackle the ambiguity of such a character?

With generosity. Even the desire to criticise his character must only come from the audience not the actors. Cuvier's distorted theories about Sarah had to be discussed objectively. We did not have the time to explore this side of Cuvier's character but I personally, would like to have studied the psychology behind someone so purposefully hateful.

How could a man of his intelligence stick so rigidly to his beliefs? It is the most unbelievable violation of intellectual logic. It even goes against his own writings. If his reasons were social, political or sentimental, so be it, but from a purely scientific point of view it was very surprising.

Both Caesar and Réaux cynically entertained the idea that an actor must give everything to his art form. Does this standpoint resonate with you?

I don't consider myself as an artist but I do think of my work as a craft that feeds itself on imagination and openness. Giving everything appears generous, but the real challenge is to home in on a thought or a feeling and with this bring to life the imaginary.

You have to lean towards this "truth" that moves us, the audience, every time. Certain actors are more truthful than others, they just know how to tell the story of life by pulling the right levers to engage our emotion. I think that the complete commitment that Caesar and Réaux refer to is a strange version of honesty.

Is Cuvier a bit like Saartjie's stage director?

When he takes possession of her she is obviously marked by her two previous "relationships". Cuvier obtains her body with a very different goal in mind to the others. The glory of science is no more artistic than the personal ambitions of a pimp. But it is in the name of something allegedly superior: scientific truth, at the forefront of humanity.

After thirty years of accolades, people in power might well imagine that destiny is in their hands. At that moment, the staging or manipulation of others becomes a temptation. This is what Cuvier does with Saartjie. Furthermore, he does not consider her as a real human being, even though he has the proof, and his gut feeling is telling him otherwise.

Adellatif Kechiche wanted no judgement to be cast on the characters, obliging the spectator to get involved, to "watch"...

Most of the characters are very ambiguous, which effectively forces the audience to play an active role. Putting forward characters with no instruction leaflet is proof of respect for the audience, in the same way as a painter or musician would. In my opinion, one of the many questions that the film asks, notably via Cuvier's attitude is: "How can one see and experience the reality of another person and yet carry on harbouring prejudice?" I'm still thinking about it...



## HOTTENTOT VENUS - OUTLINE OF KEY EVENTS

### 1770 (estimated date)

Birth of Saartjie Baartman to a Khoisan family in what is now South Africa and was at the time under Boer rule.

### 1770–1795

Her family arranges for her to work as a slave for white colonialists at Hilleger Muller's farm. She is then sold on to Pieter Caezar, a trader from Cape Town. Over the years she finds refuge in alcohol. As a teenager, she suffers from Steatopygia (enlargement of the buttocks) and Macronymphia (abnormally large labia). These medical conditions arouse the curiosity and sexual fantasies of Western society.

### 1803

Saartjie becomes the slave of Pieter's brother, Hendrick Caezar and through him meets a penniless European Hendrick Van Jong who becomes her lover. They have a child together who dies, as do the two other children that Saartjie has with other men who remain unknown. Hendrick Van Jong leaves her in 1806 and returns to Holland.

### 1808

Hendrick Caezar, well aware of Saartjie's "exotic" potential, persuades her that she can make a great fortune from her physical attributes. Caezar forms an association with Alexander Dunlop, a Scottish surgeon, who organizes the papers that enable them to leave South Africa.

### 1810

Saartjie arrives in England, as a slave to both Dunlop and Caezar. She wins over the London public with freak show performances at local fairs, playing the role of a "tamed Hottentot".

### 28th November 1810

Following a complaint from the African Association, accusing Caezar of slavery, the case goes before the High Court. When interviewed Saartjie declares "I have no com-

plaints to make about my master or those who exhibit me. I am perfectly happy in my current situation and have no desire whatsoever to return to my home country."

### 1811

On Dunlop's insistence, Saartjie is baptized at Manchester Cathedral.

### 1814

Sarah leaves London for Paris, escorted by a man, probably Caezar, who had by then changed his identity. He puts her in lodgings near the Palais Royal, a hotspot of moral depravity. The "Hottentot Venus" wins over new audiences and even inspires the creation of an Operetta named after her.

### 1815

Sarah is taken on by Réaux, an enigmatic shopkeeper and showman of wild animals. She soon becomes the "star" of Parisian high-society functions.

### March 1815

"Hottentot Venus" attracts the attention of the scientific community and, in particular, a well-known early 19th-century anatomist, Georges Cuvier. Réaux grants Cuvier permission to examine Sarah over a three day period in the Department of Anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes. Sarah refuses to show her genitalia, despite pressure from the scientists.

### 29th December 1815

Sarah's popularity loses momentum. She is more often than not exhibited in seedy music halls as she gradually becomes involved in prostitution. After one very harsh Parisian winter she falls ill and dies. Her death is probably due to a combination of pneumonia and venereal disease.

### 1817

Two years on, the anatomist Georges Cuvier presents the Academy of Medicine with a report detailing the results

of his research on Sarah's corpse. After her death he has dissected her body and taken plaster casts. He concluded: "Those races whose skulls are compressed and indented are condemned to a perpetually inferior existence."

### 1817 – 1994

Plaster cast moulds, her skeleton and jars containing Sarah's brain and genitals are exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris up until 1976 when they were withdrawn from display and consigned to a storeroom.

### 1994

After the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the leaders of the Khoisan people petitioned Nelson Mandela to ask François Mitterand to return Sarah's remains to her country of birth. The request is refused by both the French authorities and scientists alike. The reason given is the wish to maintain the Musée de l'Homme collection intact, and in the name of science.

### 29th January 2002

The French MP Nicolas About puts forward a bill to ensure the return of "Hottentot Venus"'s remains to her country. The bill is voted for unanimously in parliament. The report published by parliament on the 30th January specifically mentions "Our country must fulfil its duty to remember the past and in particularly colonization. Even though it may be difficult, we must acknowledge the errors that were made that have tarnished this period of our history, and, in particular, slavery which was a crime against humanity."

### 9th August 2002

As part of the celebrations of Women's day in South Africa, the remains of Sarah Baartman are buried in the Cape Province, where she was born. The South African president, Thabo Mbeki, is present as are a group of foreign dignitaries, priests and poets.

# ABDELLATIF KECHICHE

Abdellatif Kechiche was born in 1960. He started out as an actor in both theatre and cinema before turning his hand to directing.

Some of his noted theatre performances include Garcia Lorca and Edouardo Manet. He also staged a play by Fernando Arrabal at the Avignon festival. In 1984 he was given the leading role in Abdelkrim Bahloul's first full-length feature film *"Mint Tea"*. Kechiche went on to act in *"Bezness"* directed by Nouri Bouzid and *"The Innocents"* directed by André Téchiné.

In 2000, Abdellatif Kechiche got behind the camera for the very first time to write and direct *"Blame it on Voltaire"*. The film tells the story of a somewhat idealistic immigrant trying to make a life for himself on the streets of Paris.

Three years later, Kechiche, brought together the language of Marivaux with the heartbreak of adolescent love in the film *"Games of Love and Chance"*. He then wrote and directed *"The Secret of the Grain"* (aka *"Couscous"*), the story of an exhausted father and his family, with the beautiful light of Sète as a backdrop to the drama.

For *"Black Venus"*, Kechiche was inspired by the extraordinary but true story of Saartjie Baartman who was known at the beginning of the 19th century as the "Hottentot Venus". Through this piece of filmmaking he continues to question the audience and explore our relationship to difference and to humanity.

## ACTOR

2005	SORRY, HATERS directed by Jeff Stanzler
2001	THE MAGIC BOX (La Boîte magique) directed by Ridha Behi
1992	BEZNESS directed by Nouri Bouzid (Damascus International Festival 1993 - Best Actor, Namur International Festival of French-speaking Film 1992 – Best Actor)
	A VAMPIRE IN PARADISE (Un Vampire au paradis) directed by Abdelkrim Bahloul
1987	THE INNOCENTS (Les Innocents) directed by André Téchiné
1984	MINT TEA (Le Thé à la menthe) directed by Abdelkrim Bahloul

## DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER

2010	BLACK VENUS (Vénus Noire) Venice Film Festival 2010 – Official Selection, in Competition
2007	THE SECRET OF THE GRAIN aka COUSCOUS (La Graine et le mulet) Cesar Awards 2008 (Best Film, Best Director, Most Promising Actress, Best Original Screenplay) Venice Film Festival 2007 (Best New Young Actress, Special Jury Prize, International Critic's Prize) Lumiere Awards 2007 (Best Director, Most Promising Actress) Louis Delluc Prize 2007
2003	GAMES OF LOVE AND CHANCE (L'Esquive) Cesar Awards 2005 (Best Film, Best Director, Most Promising Actress, Best Original Screenplay) Lumiere Awards 2005 (Best Screenplay) Torino Film Festival 2004 (Best Director, Best Screenplay, 'CinemAvvenire' Award) Stockholm International Film Festival 2004 (Honorable Mention)
2001	BLAME IT ON VOLTAIRE (La Faute à Voltaire) Venice Film Festival 2000 (Golden Lion for Best First Film, International Youth Award) Namur International Festival of French-speaking Film 2000 (Special Jury Prize, Youth Jury Prize) Angers European First Film Festival 2001 (Special Jury Prize, Best Performance awarded to the entire cast) Stuttgart Film Festival 2001 (Jury Prize, Best Actor) Cologne Festival 2001 (Best Actor)

An MK2 production

In collaboration with France 2 Cinéma

With the participation of Canal +, France Télévisions, Le Centre National de la Cinématographie et de l'image animée, Cinécinéma

In association with Soficinéma 5, Artémis Productions/Patrick Quinet

With funding from the Ile de France region, Acsé / Fonds images de la diversité, European Commission Media Programme

**Producers** MARIN KARMITZ, NATHANAËL KARMITZ, CHARLES GILLIBERT

**STARRING**

**Saartjie** YAHIMA TORRÈS

**Hendrick Caesar** ANDRE JACOBS

**Réaux** OLIVIER GOURMET

**Jeanne** ELINA LÖWENSOHN

**Georges Cuvier** FRANÇOIS MARTHOURET

**Jean-Baptiste Berré** MICHEL GIONTI

**Charles Mercailler** JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BOUVET

**Original screenplay** ABDELLATIF KECHICHE

**Adaptation and dialogue** ABDELLATIF KECHICHE AND GHALYA LACROIX

**Cinematography** LUBOMIR BAKCHEV, SOFIAN EL FANI

**Editor** CAMILLE TOUBKIS, GHALYA LACROIX, LAURENT ROUAN, ALBERTINE LASTERA

**Sound** NICOLAS WASCHKOWSKI, JEAN-PAUL HURIER

**Sets** FLORIAN SANSON, MATHIEU MENUT

**Costumes** FABIO PERRONE

**Casting** ANNE FREMIOT, MONYA GALBI

**Original music** SLAHEDDINE KECHICHE

**Director** ABDELLATIF KECHICHE



INTERNATIONAL SALES  
MK2

55, RUE TRAVERSIÈRE - 75012 PARIS  
TEL: +33 1 44 67 30 30 / FAX: +33 1 43 07 29 63  
WWW.MK2-CATALOGUE.COM

JULIETTE SCHRAMECK  
HEAD OF INTERNATIONAL SALES AND ACQUISITIONS  
EMAIL: JULIETTE.SCHRAMECK@MK2.COM

MATTHIEU GIBLIN  
SENIOR INTERNATIONAL SALES EXECUTIVE  
EMAIL: MATTHIEU.GIBLIN@MK2.COM

DOROTHÉE PFISTNER  
SALES AND MARKETING EXECUTIVE  
EMAIL: DOROTHEE.PFISTNER@MK2.COM

CLÉMENCE PERRIER-LATOUR  
MARKETING & FESTIVALS MANAGER  
EMAIL: CLEMENCE.PERRIER-LATOUR@MK2.COM

INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY IN VENICE

CHARLES MCDONALD  
CHARLES@CHARLESMCDONALD.CO.UK  
TEL: +39 335 671 8646

MANLIN STERNER  
MANLIN@MANLIN.SE  
TEL: +33 663 76 3113

MATTHEW SANDERS  
MATTHEW@MAGICCLANTERNART.ORG.UK  
MOBILE PH: +44 7815 130 390