

LES FILMS VELVET PRESENTS

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BOUJILA

FRANCK
GASTAMBIDE

CHIARA
MASTROIANNI

A FILM BY **FARID BENTOUMI**

GOOD LUCK SAM



BASED ON A TRUE STORY

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GOOD LUCK SAM

[GOOD LUCK ALGERIA]

2016 – France, Belgium – 90 min - Scope



FILMS DISTRIBUTION

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SYNOPSIS

Samir has given much of his time and money developing ski equipments for a Swedish Olympic athlete. When the contract fails, his business partner and closest friend plans to save their company by sending Samir to represent Algeria at the Winter Olympics! Already broke, and expecting his second child, Samir trains to become the first Algerian cross-country skiing male athlete to participate in the winter games. Samir, the eldest son of an Algerian emigrant must first go back to his father's homeland in order to achieve this goal.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Good Luck Sam is based on a true story: your brother's.

I wanted to broach a complex subject that is rarely treated and yet at the same time is such a widespread experience: being binational, living between two countries and two cultures. My producer, Frédéric Jouve, and I wanted to tell a positive story about immigration. Frédéric grew up in Marseilles and many of his friends have Algerian roots. After talking it through, it became clear that we needed to take my brother's story as inspiration. My brother participated in the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin representing Algeria. His adventure was symbolic of the narrative story arc we wanted to relate: a Franco-Algerian who lives in France and takes on a challenge that will reconcile him with his roots.

Good Luck Sam appears to be a social comedy at first but then the film widens its horizons to a larger issue concerning family legacy and cultural heritage.

Comedy was essential. I wanted the audience to greatly empathize with Samir, and want to follow him to the very end, whatever happened. And then, the story of a man who skis in the Winter Olympics for Algeria has a strong comic potential that couldn't be ignored. That's one of the reasons why I chose Franck Gastambide to play his sidekick. He's a really nice guy to begin with and he has a simple and beautiful connection with comedy.

The starting point was my brother's story, but the movie then develops larger issues concerning family. In 2007, I made a documentary about my family and I remained frustrated with the question of how to accurately render this complex situation of living between two countries as my parents do. I wanted to take another look at this issue, but through fiction, which is my true profession. Good Luck Sam is in fact many movies in one: a film about a small company, a film about family and roots, and a film about sports. It's a comedy but there is also a lot of emotion. And although it's a film that takes place between Algeria and France, family is at its heart, and the story of passing things down from one generation to the next is universal.

The scene when the father prepares Algerian flags to support his son in his Olympic endeavor is both funny and touching.

This scene is true to life. When my brother decided to participate in the Olympic Games, my father made flags and baked a huge cake decorated with the colors of Algeria. He rented a bus to follow my brother all the way to Turin! It was really this enormous family adventure. Seeing the Algerian flag amidst all the other flags in Turin was really something. Yet, we did not speak about the patriotic dimension with my father or my brother. We kept to concrete matters, as does the film. The father doesn't have anything to say about his homeland or the

symbol of a flag. He's just extremely proud of his son.

Samir's father says something quite beautiful to him: he didn't fight for integration, but for his children to have a choice.

Yes and concerning his son's choice to start his own company instead of planting olive trees in Algeria, the father can only support and help him to the fullest in his endeavor. The perfect father! In his eyes it is social advancement that is important, not integration per se into French society itself. Moreover, the current debate on national identity is absurd. My father came from Algeria to work in the Saint Etienne mines. He dug the tunnel under the Mont-Blanc. Didn't my father also do his part in building France?

This debate neglects the human element. I grew up in France; I established my family, my life projects here. I'm French. But I'm also Algerian and very proud to be a binational citizen. Good Luck Sam is an answer to all people of Algerian ancestry who wonder if they should renounce their Algerian culture to integrate. Racism has never determined my choices or held me back. I thought it was important for my character to feel the same way. The fact that Samir participates in the Olympic Games under the Algerian flag to save his company which makes 100% French skis is a way of thumbing your nose at all these debates on national identity!

Samir is married to a French woman with Italian roots...

In the same way that Samir's mother learned to speak Arabic and lives in Algeria, we can tell that Samir's wife is very much in love with him. She asks their children to accept him for who he is, to try and understand him. She's like an interpreter between him and them, between the two cultures that the children belong to. The open-mindedness that Samir learned from his parents could only be followed with more cultural openness in his own marriage. And this allowed us to show the difference between the French of Algerian origin and the French of Italian origin, people whose identity is no longer questioned. But I believe in thirty years' time we will no longer ask North Africans about their roots either.

All the characters have this characteristic about them: if they're not perfect, like the father, they are at least kind.

Indeed, there aren't any "bad guys" in the film, no exterior conflict. The conflict is an inner one, in Samir's dual origin. He feels fine at the beginning, he manufactures skis that are 100% French; he lives in France. And then he realizes that he has an inner conflict that he needs to resolve.

Even the banker isn't unkind.

No, she just confronts Samir's poetic project with reality. There was no point in the banker being harsh. The scene is even stronger when Samir has to clash with someone who finds him nice. And on top of it, even his friend Stephane

at some point no longer believes in the project himself. Yet despite all these alarming signs, Samir continues. And the audience is ready to cheer him on. It turns out that Samir was right to believe in the impossible; poetry is the winner in the end.

Going from France to Algeria is like a second wind.

The first hour of the film occurs over a three-month period while the half-hour in Algeria relates one and a half days. I really wanted this character, someone who is determined to compete to save his company, who is always in this active Western rhythm, to suddenly experience the way time seems to expand in this country. Algerians take their time. They take the time to come together as a family as well. There, you can go without seeing someone for twenty years, but you are still cousins. Blood ties are very strong. I wanted the spectator to feel these family ties, that Samir feel them himself, that this voyage should leave an impression on him. When Samir's cousin shows him the photos of his children, and explains that his daughter's name is Jihad and his son's Oussama, there is nothing left to say about the cultural divide between them; but they are still cousins, nonetheless.

The argument with his uncles about the land, however, is quite violent.

That's another reason why the main character had to be someone the audience would empathize with: when we watch the scene where Samir argues with his uncles, we want him to

have the twenty thousand Euros to save his company. We completely accept his Western way of thinking. It makes total sense for his father to keep the land, it's his.

Yes, but we understand the uncles' argument as well...

Yes, his way of thinking is confronted with another way of thinking that is just as legitimate: that of his uncles and cousins who live in the village and are sustained by cultivating these lands. Everyone is right, everyone has their reasons. This confrontation with the uncles is even harder on Samir's father because his son doesn't speak Arabic and he is the one who has to translate a reality that he doesn't want to think about: Samir is never going to return to take care of his lands. He is completely involved in his life in France. The matter of roots and legacy doesn't lapse into sentimentality.

The scene when the father tells Samir that he has decided to sell his land is nevertheless very moving.

The emotion is there because there are vital things at stake. For the father, these trees encompass and sum up an entire life's work. Their transmission isn't merely a question of cultural heritage or an administrative notion, as in the West. The father's connection to the land is very concrete: these are trees he planted and watered which then grew and gave fruit.

Yet it is perhaps due to this very concrete notion of inheritance that, paradoxically, the father is capable of letting the land go for his son.

The father is the one who follows the most complex trajectory in the film: he decides to sell his land and be buried in France...He chooses the country of his wife and children, as opposed to the place with his trees and his land. He favors the human element over the notion of homeland, inheritance and material assets. And in the end so does Samir. He participates in the Olympic Games to save his company but also, and perhaps above all, to make his father happy so that he will be proud of him.

Why didn't you shoot in Algeria?

Three weeks before we asked for the authorizations, a French man was killed there; his throat was slashed in the Aurès. We didn't feel up to bringing a French team there. The insurance wouldn't even have allowed it. We thus shot the Algiers scenes locally, and the other scenes were filmed in Morocco, in Berber country. As a result, the children didn't speak Arabic, and we didn't have the Algerian atmosphere of the women who sing in the fields or make jokes in the kitchen, of the men conversing under the olive trees during harvest... Fortunately, we were able to add soundscapes, discussions in Algerian Arabic that I taped with my family in Algeria or soundbites from my documentary.

Why did you choose Sami Bouajila to play Samir?

Sami has a very wide acting range, from comedy to the most serious and powerful emotions. He never stops fighting for his role; he's 200% present, from morning until night. His energy is unbelievable. I really wrote it for him. He has

a striking resemblance to my brother. They're the same age, and both come from Grenoble. When he agreed to do the film I was really happy because I don't know what I would have done otherwise.

How did he prepare for this character with such athletic qualities?

He asked for a stand-in for the ski scenes. So I asked my brother to do it, but Sami was so committed that between two takes he would leave for the slopes to practice. And he watched my brother. In two days he'd understood him, his position on the skis, his arms and very quickly he wanted to do it himself! My brother only stood in for him the first few days of filming. Or for wide shots, when I wanted his movement to appear more professional, more elegant. Sami also met my parents and my nephews. I could tell he was observing them as they spoke together, to draw inspiration from the smallest gesture. Even with me – he was like a sponge. In fact, he went to the costume department and asked to be dressed like me in the film! Sami literally immersed himself in my family.

How did you find Bouchakor Chakor Djaltia, who plays Samir's father?

I was looking for someone like my father, an Algerian who had lived in the mountains, who skied and snowshoed, who was used to walking in the snow. All of that creates a way of speaking, dressing, and being. It chisels a body that is completely different from someone who has worked and lived in the Paris suburbs. So my casting director, Antoine Carrard, went down

to Grenoble and found Bouchakor in a club for elderly Algerians. This man has had a surprising life. He ran a cabaret in Marseilles in the 1950s, returned to Algeria in 1964, where he sold sea-shells on the beach and played Shakespeare in Oran. When I met him, he quoted Shakespeare to me in Arabic! Then he returned to France in the 90s. Now he lives between France and Algeria. He still has incredible energy at the age of eighty-two, and sees the world through guileless eyes. For him the shoot was an unexpected miracle, a wild experience that allowed him to go to Austria, Morocco and Italy.

And the choice of Chiara Mastroianni and Hélène Vincent?

Chiara has something very natural about her as well as a strength of character that I very much appreciated in Desplechin's *A Christmas Tale*. It's that Chiara that I wanted and sought out. A down to earth Chiara, who is funny and makes Samir face up to his contradictions. I directed her so that she would always be stronger than him, but without judging or crushing him. She's not the type of woman who bawls out her husband or sends him to sleep on the sofa. I wanted her to criticize him for acting without thinking, but also to love him for seeing this crazy endeavor through. She can walk that subtle line.

As for Hélène Vincent, she's a magnificent actress, as wonderful on stage as she is on screen. Two or three takes are enough with her. She's magic, there is such precision in her acting. And she has blue eyes like my mother, which doesn't hurt!

How did you tackle the direction?

In starting with the actors. I'm an actor myself; I believe in their instinct. Every morning in rehearsal, I saw how they approached the scene, where they felt comfortable, how they moved, spoke to each other, and based on this dynamic we decided how we were going to cut things up. Always with the basic idea of constantly following Samir, to stick to his life and his doubts. He's in almost every take.

The only scenes that were decided in advance were those that took place in the snow, in order to simplify the transportation of the material on snowmobiles. But since there wasn't enough snow, we had to go to Italy, and then Austria, and in the end everything we had planned around the French slopes no longer worked!

These snow scenes are both realistic and poetic.

Cross-country skiing is an extremely physically demanding sport. We filmed real Austrian champions and we were all impressed to see them practically fly above the snow. Images of cross-country skiing on film or TV reveal that it is a very difficult sport, but it appears slow, drawn out. I wanted the audience to get a sense of the competition, what obstacles Samir would have to overcome, and the battle he would have to wage in order to qualify. Here again, we worked a great deal with the soundscape to add the noises of the skis and breathing. I wanted to give the scenes a rhythm and a feeling for what was at stake, but at the same time preserve nature's poetry and muted at-

mosphere. The first time that Samir gets lost in the middle of the mountains, he discovers a second youth: he yells out loud, crosses this landscape's immensity, and then disappears on the horizon... Suddenly, you feel smaller, and far more humble.

And the choice of Isabelle Dumas for director of photography?

When Isabelle read my project, she said: "Just because the situations and dialogues are realistic doesn't mean that the film has to be gray and naturalistic." I really let her work in that direction because I also felt that we needed color and contrast. Isabelle is very demanding; I trusted her entirely, which allowed me to delegate a lot of the framing and image to her. As a result, I could devote more time to the actors and work on directing them which is, I believe, the heart of a director's job. Isabelle ended up having to carry a camera that weighed 15 kilograms [33 lbs.] throughout the shoot, including in the snow, but she never once proposed to substitute it with a lighter camera or optics, which may have compromised what we were aiming for. She proved to be extremely committed to the film.

More generally, it was beautiful to see how my entire crew fought so that this film could exist. We were a tightly-knit group – united when facing difficulties and motivated by our mutual desire to make this film come true. They all knew that the story they were capturing was that of my brother and my parents, who all came to the shoot at one point or another.

A story that they probably felt was worth telling. Especially today.

Interview by Claire Vassé

FARID BENTOUMI

Farid Bentoumi was born on January 18th 1976 in Saint Jean de Maurienne, France.

After pursuing higher education for several years, and a great many voyages, he decided to call the theater his home. Trained in improvisation, he has played Novarina, Beckett, Brecht and Racine. He directed and co-wrote a number of stage plays including *Novgorod*, a creation about contemporary Russia. A Talent Adami Cannes recipient in 2003, he then shot a number of short films and television series.

In 2005 he received the Grand Jury Prize from the Screenwriters' Festival and launched into writing screenplays. After *El Migri*, a documentary on his Franco-Algerian family, he directed *Un Autre Jour Sur Terre [Another Day On Earth]*, a dreamy, offbeat fiction that was very well received in a number of festivals. *Burners* was his third short film, followed by *Un Métier Bien [A good job]*.

In 2016, Farid Bentoumi released his first feature film, *Good Luck Sam*, inspired by his brother's own story, with Sami Bouajila, Franck Gastambide and Chiara Mastroianni.

CAST

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------|
| Sam | Sami Bouajila |
| Stéphane | Franck Gastambide |
| Bianca | Chiara Mastroianni |
| Françoise | Helène Vincent |
| Kader | Bouchakor Chakor Djaltia |
| Stella | Coralie Avril |
| Sarah | Fadila Belkebla |

CREW

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Director | Farid Bentoumi |
| Screenwriter | Farid Bentoumi |
| In collaboration with | Noé Debré |
| | Gaëlle Macé |
| Director of photography | Isabelle Dumas |
| Production manager | Christophe Grandière |
| Production designer | David Faivre |
| Editor | Jean-Christophe Bouzy |
| Sound | Ingrid Ralet, Luc Thomas |
| Original music | Robin Foster |
| Producer | Frederic Jouve – <i>Les Films Velvet</i> |
| Co-producers | Luc & Jean-Pierre Dardenne |
| | <i>Les Films Du Fleuve</i> |
| French distribution | Ad Vitam |
| World sales | Films Distribution |