

UNITÉ AND VATOS LOCOS PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

SALEM

A FILM BY JEAN-BERNARD MARLIN

STARRING DALIL ABDOURAHIM, OUMAR MOINDJIE, WALLENN EL GHARBAOUI,
MOHAMED SOUMARE, RACHID OUSSANI, MARYSSA BAKOUM, INÈS BOUZID

2023 • FRANCE • COLOUR • FORMAT : 2.39 - 5.1 • RUNNING TIME : 120MIN

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| SYNOPSIS



Djibril is a young Comorian living in a troubled district of Marseille. A member of the Grasshoppers, he is in love with Camilla, a Roma girl member of rival gang, the Crickets. When she tells him she's pregnant, Djibril asks her to have an abortion, in order to avoid all-out gang war. But the murder of one of his friends before his eyes ignites the two housing projects. Traumatized, Djibril slips little by little into madness. Convinced that his neighborhood has been cursed, he resolves to keep his child, whatever the price: only she can save them all from chaos.

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-BERNARD MARLIN

Why did you call your film *Salem*?

Because 'salem' ('salaam' in English) means 'peace' in Arabic. Djibril, the hero of the film, tries to lead others, who are in the middle of a war between neighbourhoods, to peace. I also chose the title because 'salem' also means 'welcome' or 'hello'. In Marseille where *Salem* is set, we all have different origins. It's a genuine territory of emigrants, with multiple ways of living. When I was a kid, all my friends were like me, mostly of foreign extraction. My mother is of Armenian origin, one of my uncles is a Rom; my father is French, but lived in a caravan for a long time, which is why the motif of the caravan often comes up in the film.

***Salem* is a story set between two communities, Comorian, and Roma. Can you explain this choice?**

The Roma world is very present in Marseille, it's a very old community there; the Comorians arrived more recently but are also very present. These two communities suffer the most in the Northern District. It's impossible not to represent them if you truly want to show the reality of life in this part of the city.

What does the form of tragedy bring to your film?

I love tragedies, particularly Shakespeare's. That's clearly one of my major references. The beginning of the film is consciously constructed as a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In tragedy, fate weighs heavily on the characters from start to finish. Djibril is marked by a 'tragic flaw': he sees the world differently to others. This compels him to react in ways that are unpredictable, irrational, and therefore sometimes perceived as dangerous.

Your story unfolds in three clearly titled chapters, each with the name of a different character. What inspired this idea?

It happened naturally, instinctively. It allows the story to take different approaches. To each chapter, a unity of action, a new or older character. There are three chapters, three units of action and rhythm. In the first chapter, the rhythm is spirited. In the second, it is slower, more meditative. Finally, the third is somewhere between the two. Nevertheless, these three parts form an integrated whole.

As in your first film *Shéhérazade*, you are once again interested in the crossed destinies of young - even very young - characters. What is it about them that is essential for you?

High school years, those of the first chapter of the film with Djibril and Camilla, this is the period of life I remember best, the one that has left the biggest mark. It's the most decisive part of youth, when your life's path is decided. What is certain is that this is the moment when feelings are heightened, when everything is emotionally very powerful. Perhaps it's a question of the first time for teenagers who start to experience adulthood.



How did you find your very young actors Dalil Abdourahim and Maryssa Bakoum, who play Djibril and Camilla, characters who are a mixture, a hybrid, of childhood and adult maturity?

We held an open call casting for ten months. The film is a first-time experience for each actor. What all these young people and non-professional actors have in common is that, like my characters, they all live in the present. This is very important. And it's a present that isn't always easy. Dalil Abdourahim and Maryssa Bakoum are, like their characters Djibril and Camilla, sometimes confronted with challenging social and family situations. These are teenagers who radiate a great deal of maturity in which we still detect something from childhood. This creates a breathtaking contrast.

Another hybridization in the film is that of landscapes. Can you say something about these wastelands, with their semi-derelict buildings and nature taking over, in which the characters move about most of the time.

It's the Marseille I know. Something between a never renovated man-made creation and a nature that seems to want to cover it. These are

very complex neighbourhoods. We shot in Cité Bassens and Cité Félix-Pyat. I've known Bassens since I was a teenager at a time when many Roma lived there. We filmed in Félix-Pyat when it was still pretty quiet. Currently it's the site of a "gang war". All these places are real and give the film a documentary aspect.

In the face of this documentary dimension, a fantastic and mystical dimension gradually emerges. Here again can we talk about hybridization?

This fantasy dimension of the film is inspired in part by the life of my father, Marco Marlin, who at times took refuge in a form of mysticism, although he wasn't a practicing religious man, where prophets and biblical figures had real meaning. He heard voices and transcribed what he perceived in writing or through drawings. Like my father, Djibril lives as a man who has received divine revelation. He hears spirits, the dead, sees signs everywhere. *Salem* is the story of an inspired man who tries to create a syncretic political and religious feeling in his neighborhood. The dimension of fantasy at the heart of reality is ideal to portray this.

And romance?

This combination of romantic naturalism and fantasy has always fascinated me. I use it here in a lyrical form to recount Djibril's madness, rather than in a classical, pure form. I feel that I grew up within the fantastic, that I heard voices too, like my father. It's what gave me the impetus to make this film: how can a child enter the inner world of his father? The world of the film is Djibril's, a kind of amalgamation of religions. In the film, he wears a Christian cross, but also a Hand of Fatima. He behaves like my father who sometimes laid his hands on me. He believed in the power of healing. This fantasy aspect also represents our contemporary world, marked by a return to spirituality and climate change.

Finally, what also fascinates me in the fantastic, between the wonderful and the bizarre, is this doubt about the reality we perceive. I think of the writer Tzvetan Todorov and his poetics of the fantastic, which poses the question: is what we see is real or is it magical?

The magical that appears constantly in Djibril's head is materialized on-screen as cicadas. Why?

The cicada - symbol of Southern France - is the insect that invades everything, it's a biblical metaphor, the leitmotiv of the film right until the end. There are cicadas that kill and cicadas that heal. For me, they are the symbol of the ambivalence of the world.

Another element is treated in a very particular way: crime. The murders in the film are part of life. They are terrible, shocking, but also part of daily life, not something exceptional.

I studied in depth the question of settling of scores in Marseille, almost an everyday occurrence. Two people who were cast died during our test shoots. One of the actors in the film even took a bullet recently. I was devastated. It is terrible and staggeringly banal. I spent time observing this life to be able to represent all the possible faces and attitudes. I needed to immerse myself in this world in order to film coherently this violence which should not be abstract or cinematically idealized.

Is transmission one of the main themes in *Salem*?

When you're a child, it is difficult not to be contaminated by the beliefs and ideas of your parents. I sometimes believed in my father's ghosts, his visions, his premonitions, his healing powers. Today I have no certainty about the reality of what he was experiencing, or whether he was right to believe. We transmit a world to our children, Djibril transmits a world to Ali, his daughter. Transmission is the only word that comes to me. Transmit is the verb I used to talk about my film to my crew; it was the most important to remind myself what I wanted to do. What do you transmit to your children when you are mentally ill? Can you inoculate your madness, your delusions? This fascinates me. In *Salem*, mental and physical illness, or belief in an invisible world, is passed from father to daughter, as if it were a virus.

With this in mind, how did you work on the sound design?

The idea was to reproduce the sounds that Djibril hears only in his head, to create a psychedelic sonic world, as in films of the late 70s and early 80s.

And the music?

The music conveys the hero's inner world. For this I gave only one indication to my composer: the soundtrack must illustrate a film-trip. We have to touch the spectator's senses as fully as possible.

You talk about senses, the image of the film is also very sensorial, like this first scene between Djibril and Camilla who do not need to talk to each other to feel great together.

Working on the sensory is for me completely instinctive, even unconscious. Now that the film is finished, I realize that *Salem* is indeed visually organic. This tone, this way of telling a story has interested me for a long time. I even wrote my thesis about it when I was at Louis-Lumière! My theme was the disorder of the senses in film, work on the image between abstraction and the figurative. When I film, I never intellectualize anything, it's all about feelings. For me, that's where the truth lies.

How did you develop this instinctive direction?

Paradoxically by a massive amount of preparation before shooting. I storyboarded everything for two or three months to get a clear vision of the *mis en scène*. The camera is still most of the time, with only a very few hand-held shots. On the one hand we are close to the characters, respecting a certain classicism of image, and on the other, we see experimental visuals break through, like dreams. As with the soundtrack, our motto was film-trip. A lot of work around the unconscious. That's what most interests me: giving free rein to the unconscious, to be able to question everything when you're about to film, on set. This is only possible if you are very prepared. I wanted this film to be a visual experience for the lead character as well as for the spectator - for everyone to have visions!

JEAN-BERNARD MARLIN



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Of Armenian origin, Jean-Bernard Marlin grew up in Marseille. He discovered auteur cinema aged 16 at a local youth centre where he also learned about the existence of state funded film schools. He moved to Paris to sit his entry exams, later graduating from the Ecole Louis-Lumière. In 2007 his short film *La Peau Dure* was selected for, and won awards at, several international festivals. In 2013, *La Fugue* won the Golden Bear for Best Short Film in Berlin and was nominated at the 2014 Césars.

In 2018 *Shéhérazade*, his feature debut, was selected for Cannes Critics' Week and won the Jean Vigo Award, the Angoulême Film Festival Award and, the following year, three César awards - Best First Film, Most Promising Actor and Most Promising Actress.

FILMOGRAPHY

FEATURE FILMS

- 2023 **SALEM** - starring Dalil Abdourahim, Oumar Moindjie and Wallenn El Gharbaoui
SELECTED IN - *Un Certain Regard*, Cannes 2023
- 2018 **SHÉHÉRAZADE** - starring Dylan Robert and Kenza Fortas
AWARDS - Cesar Award for Best First Film, 2019 | Cesar Award for Most Promising Actor 2019, Dylan Robert | Cesar Award for Most Promising Actress 2019, Kenza Fortas | Jean Vigo Award 2018 | Special Jury Mention, Zurich Film Festival 2018
SELECTED IN - *Semaine de la Critique*, Cannes 2018

SHORT FILMS

- 2013 **LA FUGUE** - starring Adel Bencherif and Médina Yaloui
AWARDS - Golden Bear for Best Short Film - Berlin Film Festival 2013 | Best Actor International Competition, Best Actress International Competition - Brussels Short Film Festival 2013 | Award for Best Director - International Festival Rhode Island 2013 | Special Mention of the Jury - Festival Tous Courts d'Aix-en-Provence 2013 | Télérama Press Award and Adami Award for Best Actor - Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival | Best Screenplay - Odense Film Festival 2014
- 2007 **LA PEAU DURE** starring Laurent Lunes, Thierry de Peretti, Tony Rodriguez - co-directed with Benoît Rambourg
AWARDS - Golden Gate Award for Best Short Film - San Francisco International Film Festival 2008 | Jury Prize, Golden Unicorn for Best Short Film - Alpine International Film Festival, Nenzing 2008

CAST

Djibril (14) **Dalil ABDOURAHIM**

Djibril (26) **Oumar MOINDJIE**

Ali **Wallenn EL GHARBAOUI**

Shakur (14) **Mohamed SOUMARE**

Shakur (26) **Rachid OUSSENI**

Camilla (14) **Maryssa BAKOUM**

Camilla (26) **Inès BOUZID**

Black Cat **Amal ISSIHAKA HALI**

Imran **Soilahoudine AHAMADI**

Anthony Romero **Anthony KREHMEIER**

CREW

Written and Directed by
Producers

Production Manager

D.P.

Editor

1st Assistant Director

Casting Director

Production Designer

Sound

VFX Supervisor

Continuity

Costume Designer

Post-Production Manager

A co-production

Formats

French Distribution

International Sales

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